Unit .19

Session .02

John, the Herald, is Born

Scripture

Luke 1:59-73a, 76-79

59 When they came to circumcise the child on the eighth day, they were going to name him Zechariah, after his father. **60** But his mother responded, "No. He will be called John." **61** Then they said to her, "None of your relatives has that name." **62** So they motioned to his father to find out what he wanted him to be called. **63** He asked for a writing tablet and wrote: "His name is John." And they were all amazed. **64** Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. **65** Fear came on all those who lived around them, and all these things were being talked about throughout the hill country of Judea. **66** All who heard about him took it to heart, saying, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the Lord's hand was with him. **67** Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: **68** Blessed is the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and provided redemption for his people. **69** He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, **70** just as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets in ancient times; **71** salvation from our enemies and from the hand of those who hate us. **72** He has dealt mercifully with our fathers and remembered his holy covenant—**73** the oath that he swore to our father Abraham. He has given us the privilege, … **76** And you, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, **77** to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins. **78** Because of our God's merciful compassion, the dawn from on high will visit us **79** to shine on those who live in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Intro Options

Main Point:
Like John, God calls all Christians to point to Jesus' arrival.

Option 1

As a large group, ask your students to give you a list of groups, teams, or organizations they would love to be a part of. For example, they might dream of joining the New York Yankees, or working with Pixar, or to be part of a particular musical band. Come up with a thorough list.

Once you have the list, ask each student to choose one particular entity from the list. They should get together with other students who chose that same entity (some students may work alone; others may end up working with four or five other people).

They should now imagine that the owner/manager of that group has contacted them and expressed a willingness to let them join. Here's what the students have to do: they have to come up with a specific plan or contract to share with said owner/manager expressing what they will do or bring to make that team/band/group better. Give them a few minutes to make their lists (if you want, you can limit them to three items on their list for time's sake). Students who ended up solo should work alone; students who ended up together should come up with one list for the entire group.

Let them share their lists. What did they plan to bring to better their groups? Afterward, ask if they'd be willing to bring those same plans to a group that wasn't necessarily the best (it wasn't cohesive, or it wasn't successful). Today's lesson will feature the birth of John, a man who came to a world that wasn't in the best shape, bringing to it good news that would result in praise, salvation, and service. How did the students' plans parallel what John would do for this world?

Option 2

The Ad Council occasionally puts out motivational posters or messages for good, healthy habits. Your students should pretend the Ad Council has recently contracted them for its next messages.

First, as a group, students should come up with a list of good habits or characteristics. They could be anything from "Washing your hands" to "Ingenuity" to "Creativity." Try to come up with a good-sized list.

Once you have your list, put students into pairs. Assign each pair one item from the list. Each pair should now come up with three benefits for whatever good habit they were assigned. They can present these three benefits in a little rhyme/jingle, a catchy slogan, or even a little cheer-like set of hand motions. Give students time to prepare their three benefits and their catchy jingles/slogans, then have them share.

As a group again, ask if trusting God's Word is a good habit (hopefully they'll say yes). Ask them to come up with three benefits from trusting God's Word. Today's lesson will feature the birth of John the Baptist; along the way, the lesson will give us three benefits from trusting God's Word: praise, salvation, and serving others.

TEACHING PLAN

Luke 1:6 tells us that Zechariah was a righteous man. This does not mean that he was without sin, but it does tell us that he was known to be a man with an outward obedience to the law of God. His wife Elizabeth, also declared righteous, was barren and now past the childbearing years. Likely zero hope remained in their hearts that they would ever become parents.

However, while Zechariah was at the temple altar, the angel Gabriel appeared to bring him incredible news: Elizabeth would have a child and this son would be a great servant of the Lord! Gabriel directed the frightened priest to name his forthcoming son John. However, Zechariah responded not in praise but in doubt. Instead of receiving this glorious news with faith—forgetting the power of the God of Abraham who brought forth Isaac from an old barren couple—Zechariah questioned the ability of God to do the same for him. And because of his faithless response, Zechariah lost his ability to speak. The power he denied was the same power that instantly took away his ability to speak.

Read Luke 1:59-66.

The best way to deal with doubt is always to look at our heavenly Father. The greatest way for us to increase our faith is to increase our focus on who God is. Zechariah learned his lesson. The prophecy was fulfilled, just as the angel Gabriel had promised, and Zechariah's response was as it should have been all along: a declaration of trust and worship. Once we have seen and known the goodness and depths of God's grace, the natural next step is always praise.

- **What actions can we take this week to move away from a "flaky" faith toward a full-assurance faith?**

Mary, the soon-to-be mother of the Messiah, stayed with Elizabeth and Zechariah for three months. Both had received impossible conceptions and a powerful prophetic word about their respective, unborn children. At the first chance he could get Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesied as to what God was doing.

Read Luke 1:67-73a.

Centuries have past since God made a covenant with the forefathers of the Hebrew people. The "prophets of old" had proclaimed the coming of a King who would rescue His people from bondage and make them into a great nation. Zechariah, a prophet himself, declared that this King had come. The waiting was over and God had not forgotten His promises.

Yet God did not send the long-awaited Messiah in the way His people expected. Instead of a commanding King, He came as a helpless baby to a humble family. He was not separated from the rest of the world by guards and pretenses. He lived among the common folk. He fished with them, ate with them, laughed with them, and cried with them.

- **How would Jesus' experience of humanity have changed if Jesus had been born into royalty instead of poverty?**

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
Like John, God calls all Christians to point to Jesus' arrival.

Luke 1

8-9. Zechariah was a descendent of Levi and all Levite men were divided into groups who would take turns serving in the Jerusalem temple. There were twenty-four divisions, and each group served twice a year for one week. Tasks were assigned through the random casting of lots. This particular week, the lot fell on Zechariah to perform the burning of incense within the sanctuary. Most Levites never got to perform such an honored task. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity for Zechariah.

59-60. God followed proper timing. So did the parents. They followed the law and on the eighth day presented the child for circumcision (Lev. 12:3). The ceremony included officially naming the child. Neighbors assumed the obvious. First child, child of old age—naturally he would have no other name but his father's. So they agreed the boy was a new Zechariah. Elizabeth interfered. Not so! John is his name. Confusion erupted. That name appears nowhere on the family tree. Why would you do a thing like that? Let Dad decide. Still silent (vv. 20–22), Zechariah wrote the name John. Astonishment filled the room. Zechariah had learned his lesson. Do not ask why or how. Just obey God.[1]

67-73. "God calls, liberates, and saves. At the ceremony for the birth of John, the Holy Spirit filled Zechariah's mouth with a prophecy about what God was doing for his people. God's people would be liberated and rescued from their enemies (Luke 1:71,74). That was to be John's message (Luke 1:76-77), that a Saviour was coming from King David's family (Luke 1:69). The Saviour would bring freedom not only from enemies but also from sin. Jesus came to give us salvation through the forgiveness of our sins (Luke 1:77). There are many who need this Good News today. Like John the Baptist, Christians should tell other people that God wants to rescue them. When we do this, the prophecies of Zechariah will be fulfilled."[2]

99 Essential Doctrines (p. 16, DDG)

Angels

Besides the creation of humanity and animals, the Bible also speaks of other beings that God created—angels, who are also referred to in Scripture as "sons of God," "holy ones," "spirits," "principalities," and "powers." In the original languages of the Bible, the word angel carries the meaning of a messenger, which indicates one of their primary reasons for existence. Angels carry out a number of other functions throughout Scripture: bringing God glory, carrying out God's plans and purpose, and reminding humanity that the unseen world is real.

TEACHING PLAN

Notice the tense Zechariah used here. God *has* visited. The Lord *has* provided. Zechariah understood that the long-awaited Messiah, the mighty horn of salvation, had already come. Through the filling and knowledge of the Holy Spirit, Zechariah proclaimed that the prophecies he and generations of Jews had waited to be fulfilled were indeed coming to pass in Mary's child. The tiny life developing in Mary's womb was the Christ. Rescue had come. Redemption was within reach. Right around the corner was victory.

- **How would you summarize your salvation story (or part of it) in a few sentences?**

Read Luke 1:76-79.

We see through this passage that God sent John for a very specific and special purpose. He was ordained to prepare God's people for some really big news: the Messiah had come! After four hundred years of silence, God's people needed some prep work in order for this reality to sink in. Some Jews may have given up on the idea that God would speak again. Many probably carried doubts that the promised Deliverer would ever come. God knew this. He recognizes our propensity toward disbelief and forgetfulness and He is constantly at work to help us receive the good news He has for us. God provided John to prepare the way for his cousin Jesus so that Jesus would become greater than he was.

- **When was a time in your life you can look back and see that God was preparing you to receive either good or bad news?**

Not only was John called to prepare the way for the Lord, he was also called to proclaim the good news of why the Messiah had come. As his father, Zechariah, rightly proclaimed, the tender mercies of God had arrived through the Most High, who brought salvation through the forgiveness of sins. Jesus came to illuminate our darkness and to guide us into peace with God.

We are each also called to serve as John did. We may not be ordained to cry out in the wilderness, but God has given each of us a specific work to do (Eph. 2:10). And though the details of the work God has for each of us might look different, all of our service contributes to the same purpose as John's: to prepare the way for others to know Christ. Whatever our specific calling, we should proclaim the name of Christ every opportunity we get.

- **What are you doing to proclaim the truth about who Jesus is to the lost world around you?**

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
Like John, God calls all Christians to point to Jesus' arrival.

Luke 1

76-79. "Zechariah now prophesies about John. John will be great. He will be called a prophet of God. He will be unique among the prophets because he will be the forerunner. He will soften the ground. He will till the soil of Israel's heart. He will not be the Savior, but John will make things ready for the Savior by teaching people how they are to be saved. John will be a giant index finger pointing the way to God's salvation from sin. Zechariah's prophecy defines John's life in relationship to Jesus's life and mission. Beloved, all lasting meaning is found when we define our lives this way. Greatness comes from serving the Lord, not from serving ourselves. Greatness comes when we, like John, say, 'We must decrease; Jesus must increase' (see John 3:30). The prophet of salvation never replaces the bringer of salvation."[3]

Activity

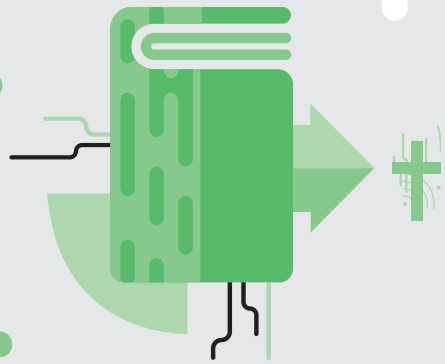
As a large group, come up with a list of "snapshot-settings" where your students might find themselves at any given moment of the day. Examples might be in the car, in a classroom, at the lake, on social media, playing an online video game, at sports practice, etc.

Get students into groups of three and assign each group one of the "snapshot settings" from the list. They should now either make a drawing, a skit, or a pantomime scene (no words) in that specific snapshot setting. Their production needs two elements: first, at least one person in the scene has to be trusting God's Word, like what happened at John's birth. Second, that act of trust should result in at least one of the three effects the lesson described (praise, salvation, serving others). If you want to take things to challenge-mode, you can have groups count off by three, with each number corresponding to an effect (one = praise, two = salvation, three = serving others). For example, an act of trust on the soccer field might be sharing Jesus with a teammate (salvation), or an act of trust in the band room might be helping a younger student tune his or her instrument with a good attitude.

Give students some time to prepare their skits/drawings/scenes, then debrief them. What other ideas did the other groups have for what trusting the Word might look like in those snapshot-settings? Ask the Holy Spirit to help you and your students live out trust in God's Word resulting in praise, salvation, and service this week.

(p. 17, DDG) Christ Connection

When Zechariah trusted God's Word concerning his son, his tongue was free to speak words of praise. Zechariah spoke of how his son, John, would be the herald pointing God's people to the Savior who had been promised throughout the Old Testament. Jesus is the Word of God, the Savior to which John's ministry pointed.



JOHN THE HERALD IS BORN

Luke 1:59–73a, 76–79

JOHN THE HERALD IS BORN

The Son of God came to bring those spiritually dead to life. Like John, God calls all Christians to point to Jesus' arrival.

JESUS CONNECTION

Zechariah believed and spoke about God's plan for his son, John, to prepare the people for the promised Savior.

LIFEWISE QUALITY

CONFIDENCE – Full trust and assurance in the reliability of a person or thing.

HEAD

Why was it difficult for Zechariah to believe that Elizabeth would have a son? What would it have looked like for Zechariah to show complete trust in God's plan?

What happened when Zechariah placed his full confidence in God's promises about his son, John?

HEART

Humanly speaking, there was no hope for Zechariah and Elizabeth to have a child (Luke 1:5–7), so at first, Zechariah doubted God's Word from the angel (Luke 1:18–20). How is doubt the opposite of confidence? Based on Zechariah's story (Luke 1:5–25, 57–80), how does confidence in God help us respond to doubt?

Confidence is about who or what we depend on. God wants us to learn to depend on Him. He wants us to "cast our burdens on Him because He cares for us" (1 Peter 5:7). Whom do you normally depend on? What would it look like to choose to show confidence (depend on) God? (*Examples: pray about your problems, ask for His peace, etc.*)

HANDS

Choose one of the options below:

1. The best way to build confidence in God is to focus more on who God is. Write down the qualities you see God display in the story of Zechariah. Which qualities will help you focus when you are tempted to doubt? Set a reminder on your phone (or write it on an index card) to read Luke 1:68 before bed every night this week to help you focus on who God is and what He's done for us.

2. Write down two ways that God has answered your prayers. What does it tell you about God that He answers prayer? Spend time thanking God for who He is and what He has done for you. If you've never told anyone how God answered your prayer, tell a friend or family member.